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Maine Politics in 2014: Still Different—But for How Much Longer?

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Introduction

Maine's 2014 political landscape is dominated by Republican Governor Paul LePage's reelection campaign. LePage, a tea-party favorite, was elected in 2010 with 38% of the vote over three credible opponents. This time he is seeking reelection against two strong challengers. With LePage's support seemingly confined to the 35-40% range, the question is whether one of his opponents can make LePage only the second Maine governor in more than a century to be denied a second term. Maine's upstate Second Congressional District, which is somewhat more conservative than the First District, will command most of the remaining attention and campaign funds. The Second District opened when six-term incumbent Democrat Mike Michaud chose to run for governor. Republican Senator Susan Collins, scion to an honored bipartisan legacy of moderate Senators from Maine, and Democratic First District Congresswoman Chellie Pingree will cruise to reelection against little-known opponents. Democrats currently control both chambers of the Maine legislature, but they may need a strong turnout to hold their majorities. In 2012, they regained both houses from the GOP by exploiting a large Presidential election turnout that will not rematerialize this time. The stakes are high. Maine's self-assigned "place apart" reputation as an exemplar of civility and moderation is facing its sternest test in 2014.¹

Paul LePage

Governor LePage follows a longstanding Maine practice of officeholders who vary from

¹ On Maine's political culture, see Howard Cody, "Maine: Recent Politics in a 'Place Apart'." *New England Journal of Political Science* 1:1, Fall 2005.

the conventional two-party norm. LePage has no background in partisan politics. He is a businessman and onetime Waterville mayor who assesses economic policies—the ones that most interest him—primarily on whether they are good for business. He ran for governor to make Maine more attractive for business investment. He proposes lower taxes on individuals and businesses while state government gets out of their way. But his undiplomatic, disrespectful personal style and his disinclination to compromise on issues important to him, even with Republican state legislators, has hindered his initiatives to make Maine more business-friendly, most visibly with his proposal for the only right-to-work law in the Northeast.²

LePage's governing model—a “my way or the highway” approach to the legislature featuring a “government by veto” with more vetoes (180-plus and counting) than any predecessor—has generated exasperation.³ Over two days (May 1-2, 2014) legislators dealt with 78 LePage vetoes. They overrode 17 of them, notably saving a large supplemental budget, but Democrats failed to muster two-thirds majorities to override the others.⁴ Perhaps we should associate LePage with the active-negative model in James David Barber's well-known study of Presidential character. Barber argues that active-negative leaders endure difficult childhoods in which their parents mistreat them in some way. Their childhoods generate anger that they turn inward.⁵ Active-negative leaders are angry and derive little joy from their efforts. They have difficulty managing their aggressive feelings.⁶ They pursue rigid, uncompromising policies and

² Dan Demeritt, “Gov. LePage Overplaying Hand on Jobs.” *Maine Sunday Telegram*, March 16, 2014, pp. E1, E4.

³ “Government by Veto Causes State to Stall.” *Maine Sunday Telegram*, April 20, 2014, p. E2. (editorial); Christopher Cousins, “179 Vetoes: Leadership or Extreme?” *Bangor Daily News*, April 30, 2014, pp. A1, A4.

⁴ Christopher Cousins, “Support for LePage Falls on Veto Day.” *Bangor Daily News*, May 3-4, 2014, pp. A1, A5.

⁵ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*. Fourth edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1992, p. 121. LePage's father was an abusive drunk who beat Paul and his siblings. At age eleven Paul ran away from home and never returned. Tom Bell, “Bonds of LePage Family Survive a Troubling, Often Brutal Upbringing in Lewiston.” *Portland Press Herald*, January 5, 2011.

⁶ Barber, pp. 9, 81.

are closed to evidence, experience and advice, even from their allies.⁷ They cannot accept compromise, as “giving in” signifies an unacceptable sacrifice of integrity and evidence of defective character.⁸ Most Mainers familiar with Governor LePage recognize his active-negative characteristics.

LePage’s Opponents

Moderate “blue dog” Democratic Congressman Mike Michaud represents LePage’s strongest possible Democratic opponent. An affable high school-educated paper mill worker from rural Maine, Michaud personifies the “real Mainer”—or did so before he came out as gay in November 2013.⁹ Initial response was supportive, but Michaud’s sexual orientation may affect his chances in unforeseeable ways.¹⁰ Cape Elizabeth lawyer Eliot Cutler, a former associate of late Senator Edmund Muskie and an authority on environmental issues, is running once again as an Independent. Cutler nearly defeated LePage in 2010. He took 36.5% of the vote when much of the support for Democrat Libby Mitchell, perceived as running third and out of contention, shifted to Cutler in the last days of the campaign. Cutler again trails badly in early polls. Some are questioning his chances this time.¹¹ Cutler is offering potential supporters a bargain: at the election if they think he cannot win, “you have my blessing to vote for someone else.”¹² Michaud holds a slight lead but LePage’s voters are the most committed.¹³ Michaud should remain formidable to the end, but we must not underestimate Cutler. Mainers’ penchant for

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ Christopher Cousins, “I Haven’t Changed. I’m Mike.” *Bangor Daily News*, November 5, 2013, pp. A1, A4.

¹⁰ “Mike Michaud is Gay.” *Bangor Daily News*, November 5, 2013, p. A6. (editorial); Randy Billings, “Michaud’s Sexuality Has Double-edged Potential.” *Maine Sunday Telegram*, June 15, 2014, pp. A1, A5.

¹¹ Christopher Cousins, “3-Way Race Puts Focus on Maine.” *Bangor Daily News*, May 12, 2014, pp. A1, A4.

¹² “A Calculus of Voting.” *Bangor Daily News*, May 17-18, 2014, p. D2. (editorial)

¹³ Steve Mistler, “LePage, Michaud in Dead Heat; Voters Hot and Cold.” *Maine Sunday Telegram*, June 22, 2014, pp. A1, A9.

independents, exemplified in former Governor Angus King's election to the United States Senate in 2012 and abetted by the wealthy Cutler's largely self-financed campaign may keep Cutler in contention.¹⁴ Michaud and Cutler could facilitate LePage's reelection, even if, as predicted, the governor wins no more than 40% of the votes once again. Bitter recriminations from the Cutler camp when gay and lesbian, abortion rights and environmental groups endorsed Michaud after Cutler had championed their causes more strongly and consistently, supply early evidence that LePage's opponents will unhelpfully direct much of their fire onto each other as they appeal to the same center-to-left and anti-LePage voters.¹⁵

Maine's Economy

Economic and tax issues will dominate the election for governor. LePage trumpets his business experience and fiscal responsibility, but his record is open to criticism. With a GOP-controlled legislature in 2011, LePage initiated a state income tax reduction that mostly benefited taxpayers in the highest income bracket.¹⁶ These \$400 million tax cuts were unfunded. They have caused serious problems in balancing state budgets ever since.¹⁷ LePage expected tax cuts to boost employment, but Maine ranks next to last among the states in job creation since 2011.¹⁸ Efforts to reform Maine's tax system have failed repeatedly. In 2013, a bipartisan "gang of twelve" crafted a new regime to lower Maine's still relatively high income and property taxes and widen its relatively low and narrowly applied general sales tax to extract more money from

¹⁴ Eric Russell, "LePage Takes Advantage of the Bully Pulpit." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, March 2, 2014, pp. A1, A5; Steve Mistler, "As Cutler Self-funds Campaign for Maine Governor, There are Challenges." *Portland Press Herald*, June 12, 2014.

¹⁵ Dennis Damon, "Conveniently Redefining Equality." *Bangor Daily News*, January 7, 2014, p. A7; Edmund S. Muskie, Jr., "Sen. Ed Muskie Believed in Eliot Cutler." *Bangor Daily News*, March 28, 2014, p. A7.

¹⁶ Joel Johnson, "The Distributional Effects of Recent Changes to Maine's Tax System." *Maine Policy Review* 22:2, Summer/Fall 2013, pp. 26-33.

¹⁷ Michael Cuzzi, "A Real CEO Wouldn't Run the State of Maine This Way." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, March 9, 2014, pp. E1, E4.

¹⁸ Amy Fried, "Little Trust in State Government." *Bangor Daily News*, April 9, 2014, p. A7.

Maine's many visitors (as Florida and Nevada do).¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, this reform went nowhere. Meanwhile, fiscal conservatives make invidious comparisons with New Hampshire, Maine's only bordering state. They suggest that if Maine adopted New Hampshire's sales and income tax model, it would enjoy the Granite State's higher personal incomes and its supposedly lower rates of crime, poverty, unemployment, and high school dropouts.²⁰

With Democrats now controlling the legislature but lacking veto-proof two-thirds majorities, and with GOP legislators aware that (unlike LePage) they will need to secure vote majorities to win reelection, the governor has endured some legislative defeats. The legislature overrode LePage's summer 2013 veto of a \$6.3 billion biennial budget.²¹ On revenue sharing, in early 2014 the legislature raided \$21 million from the state's rainy day fund and passed a bill to restore \$40 million in state aid to municipalities. Veto-proof margins in both chambers (120-17 in the House and 33-2 in the Senate) averted unpopular property tax increases. LePage deplored this "irresponsible and incompetent" initiative. He let the bill become law without his signature, but later swore he was unaware that most Republicans had voted for it!²²

LePage wishes to add to Maine's distinction as a "place apart" regional outlier not only with a right-to-work law but, thus far more successfully, with a refusal to expand Medicaid benefits (called "MaineCare") under the Affordable Care Act to some 70,000 childless Mainers with incomes up to 138% of the federal poverty level. As LePage's position is embedded in fixed principle, compromise is unacceptable. The governor is unmoved by Washington's offer to cover 100% of the cost for at least three years. He also does not care that Maine's taxpayers will subsidize Medicaid in other states while many of their fellow Mainers cannot access these

¹⁹ Richard Woodbury, "Issues in Tax Reform in Maine." *Maine Policy Review* 22:2, Summer/Fall 2013, pp. 11-25.

²⁰ Seth Koenig, "Why Did Maine Lose Its Edge over NH?" *Bangor Daily News*, October 26-27, 2013, p. B2.

²¹ Alanna Durkin, "LePage Lets Maine Budget Fix Become Law without Signing." Associated Press, April 3, 2014.

²² Seth Koenig, "LePage: Rainy Day Fund Use Wasteful." *Bangor Daily News*, March 5, 2014, pp. A1, A4.

services.²³ Stigmatizing MaineCare as “welfare” and its expansion as “ruinous” to Maine’s finances, LePage believes that “able-bodied” people should pay for their health care out of their own resources or through private insurance.²⁴ In further criminalizing addiction, the governor evidently prefers incarceration to MaineCare-funded treatment for drug addicts despite the prison system’s far higher human and financial costs. LePage calls Maine’s methadone clinics an “absolute dismal failure.”²⁵ Two GOP state senators devised a proposal to meet some objections to MaineCare expansion by outsourcing administrative expenses through a managed care system where private insurance companies would compete to enroll Maine’s entire 320,000-strong MaineCare population. The expanded coverage would last only as long as Washington provided 100% of the funding.²⁶ This alternative passed the legislature easily, winning support mostly from Democrats, but it failed to obtain the two-thirds majorities to override LePage’s veto.²⁷ Most GOP legislators evidently believe that rejecting revenue sharing might endanger their reelection, but opposing MaineCare expansion inflicts no comparable punishment.

State and Federal Legislative Races

Senator Collins failed to attract a tea party primary challenger from the right despite her alleged RINO (Republican in name only) credentials, so she can direct her considerable financial resources to the general election against her Democratic challenger, Shenna Bellows. Mainers recognize that Collins embodies the civility and accommodation that their governor disdains.

²³ “Logic Didn’t Prevail: The Medicaid Episode Has Come to a Close.” *Bangor Daily News*, April 14, 2014, p. A6. (editorial)

²⁴ Mario Maretto, “For 3rd Time, LePage Vetoes Medicaid Expansion Bill.” *Bangor Daily News*, April 10, 2014, pp. A1, A4.

²⁵ Scott Thistle, “LePage Airs Plan to Fight Drug Trade.” *Bangor Daily News*, March 12, 2014, pp. A1, A4; Nick McCrea, “Addicts’ Loss of Treatment Troubling.” *Bangor Daily News*, February 4, 2013, pp. A1, A2; “LePage’s War on Drugs a Wrong-headed Plan.” *Maine Sunday Telegram*, February 9, 2014, p. E2. (editorial)

²⁶ “The Art of Compromise.” *Bangor Daily News*, March 14, 2014, p. A6. (editorial)

²⁷ Christopher Cousins, “Senate Upholds Third Medicaid Expansion Veto.” *Bangor Daily News*, April 12, 2014, pp. A1, A4.

Collins' position as one of *Elle* magazine's ten most powerful women in Washington, and the only Senator on the list at that, burnishes her image further.²⁸

Both national parties are targeting Maine's open Second Congressional District this year. There was a white-versus-blue collar contest for the Democratic nomination between candidates with minor policy differences. State Senator Emily Cain, a University of Maine administrator, easily defeated fellow State Senator Troy Jackson, a logger from the far north who had the support of the state AFL-CIO and billed himself as the candidate of working people. Cain has won praise for her collaborative style and success in forging cross-party consensus in the legislature.²⁹ The GOP contest pitted moderate Kevin Raye against tea party right winger Bruce Poliquin. Raye led early polls.³⁰ When Poliquin won the nomination with help from a low turnout, some expressed doubt that the GOP could unite behind a candidate "so far to the right it's hard to see how he could ever creep toward the middle."³¹ Even so, post-primary polls give Cain only a slim lead.³² This race and some state legislative contests will feature mostly negative third-party advertising from out of state interests including the liberal George Soros and the conservative Koch brothers. In 2012, for the first time, hundreds of thousands of outside dollars were directed to a handful of contests, mostly for television attack advertising. In any event, turnout will make the difference in the closest elections. All state legislators serve two-year terms. Democrats must mobilize young voters who often sit out off-year elections if they expect

²⁸ Emily Burnham, "Collins Named One of Most Powerful Women in DC." *Bangor Daily News*, March 20, 2014, pp. B1, B4.

²⁹ "Vote for Emily Cain." *Bangor Daily News*, June 1, 2014, p. A6. (editorial)

³⁰ Kevin Miller, "2nd District Campaign Begins to Take Shape." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, December 1, 2013, pp. B1, B5.

³¹ "Cain, Poliquin, and the Middle." *Bangor Daily News*, June 12, 2014, p. A6. (editorial)

³² Steve Mistler, "Poll Suggests 2nd District's Cooking up into a Competitive Race." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, June 22, 2014, p. 9.

to maintain control of the legislature or win the governorship or the open Congressional seat.

Conclusion

For decades Maine's political culture has respected Daniel Elazar's moralistic model that values consensus and admires political life for seeking and serving the common good.³³ It likewise has reflected Colin Woodard's "Yankeedom" region with its faith in government as an honorable activity and a constructive force.³⁴ Occasionally Maine's politics still features civility, mutual respect, pragmatism, and bipartisan consensus-seeking negotiations that preserve the moderate center.³⁵ For example, in March 2014 the legislature achieved near-unanimity on a supplemental state budget Governor LePage opposed but let pass without his signature or a veto which surely would have been overridden.³⁶ But Maine's political culture may be changing decisively in conformity with national trends. LePage's incivility and governing style are corroding Maine's consensus politics, while Poliquin's nomination suggests that Maine's Republican Party may be growing more conservative, rejecting compromise and "even the whiff of moderation."³⁷ Poliquin repudiates bipartisan deal-making on principle.³⁸ In national politics, Congress's "policy making has become increasingly partisan, petty and vindictive."³⁹ A recent Pew Research Center poll finds that "the level of antipathy that members of each party feel towards the opposing party has surged over the past few decades" across the country.⁴⁰

³³ Daniel Elazar, *The American Mosaic: The Impact of Space, Time, and Culture in American Politics*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, pp. 230-232.

³⁴ Colin Woodard, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011, pp. 5, 60.

³⁵ Amy Fried, "Let's Revise Political Stereotypes about Maine." *Bangor Daily News*, January 29, 2014, p. A7.

³⁶ Scott Thistle, "LePage Lets Budget Fix Go into Effect." *Bangor Daily News*, April 4, 2014, p. B2.

³⁷ Michael Cuzzi, "Poliquin's Nomination Confirms GOP's Major Shift to the Right." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, June 15, 2014, p. E3.

³⁸ Amy Fried, "Poliquin Pick Quickens the Pulse of Maine's Far Right." *Bangor Daily News*, June 18, 2014, p. A7.

³⁹ Richard Barberio, *The Politics of Public Policy*. New York: Pearson, 2014, p. 18.

⁴⁰ Dan Balz, "Pew Poll: In Polarized America, We Live as We Vote." *Washington Post*, June 12, 2014.

Moreover, Elazar asserts that a moralistic culture “acts as a restraint against the tendencies of the individualistic political culture to tolerate *anything* as long as it is in the marketplace.”⁴¹ A decade ago, Maine’s moralistic restraint helped to hold off casinos. That battle has been lost. Now casino gambling is fully established in Maine, with Mainers making up 80% of gamblers at the Oxford casino and 90% at Bangor.⁴² More casinos are under consideration. Until recently, Maine’s moralistic culture helped Mainers disdain political attack advertising. Another “anything” that once distinguished Maine may be disappearing. How much longer can Mainers, with or without Paul LePage, preserve their moralistic “place apart” exceptionalism while fending off the individualistic political culture’s incursions and American politics’ growing ideological polarization and hyper-partisanship? Or do they still care?

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⁴¹ Daniel Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States*. Third edition. New York: Harper and Row, 1984, p. 252. Emphasis added.

⁴² Kathryn Skelton, “Groups Vying for Piece of Casino Pie.” *Bangor Daily News*, January 27, 2014, pp. A1, A8.